

HOW SOUTH AUSTRALIANS DUMPED THE PLAN FOR A HIGH-LEVEL INTERNATIONAL NUCLEAR WASTE DUMP

Nuclear-Free Campaign
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In November 2016, two-thirds of the 350 members of a South Australian-government initiated Citizens' Jury rejected "under any circumstances" the plan to import vast amounts of high-level nuclear waste from around the world as a money-making venture.

The following week, South Australian (SA) Liberal Party Opposition leader Steven Marshall said that "[Premier] Jay Weatherill's dream of turning South Australia into a nuclear waste dump is now dead." Business SA chief Nigel McBride said: "Between the Liberals and the citizens' jury, the thing is dead."

And after months of uncertainty, Premier Weatherill said in June 2017 that the plan is "dead", there is "no foreseeable opportunity for this", and it is "not something that will be progressed by the Labor Party in Government".

So is the dump dead? The Premier left himself some wriggle room, but the plan is as dead as it possibly can be. If there was some life in the plan, it would be loudly proclaimed by SA's Murdoch tabloid, *The Advertiser*. But *The Advertiser* responded to the Premier's recent comments – to the death of the dump – with a deafening, deathly silence.

Royal Commission

It has been quite a ride to get to this point. The debate began in February 2015, when the Premier announced that a Royal Commission would be established to investigate commercial options across the nuclear fuel cycle. He appointed a nuclear advocate, former Navy man Kevin Scarce, as Royal Commissioner. Scarce said he would run a "balanced" Royal Commission and appointed four nuclear advocates to his advisory panel, balanced by one critic. Scarce appointed a small army of nuclear advocates to his staff, balanced by no critics.

The final report of the Royal Commission, released in May 2016, was surprisingly downbeat given the multiple levels of pro-nuclear bias. It rejected – on economic grounds – almost all of the proposals it considered: uranium conversion and enrichment, nuclear fuel fabrication,

conventional and Generation IV nuclear power reactors, and spent fuel reprocessing.

The only thing left standing (apart from the small and shrinking uranium mining industry) was the plan to import nuclear waste as a commercial venture. Based on commissioned research, the Royal Commission proposed importing 138,000 tonnes of high-level nuclear waste (spent nuclear fuel from power reactors) and 390,000 cubic metres of intermediate-level waste.

The SA Labor government then established a 'Know Nuclear' statewide promotional campaign under the guide of 'consultation'. The government also initiated the Citizens' Jury.

The first sign that things weren't going to plan for the government was on 15 October 2016, when 3,000 people participated in a protest against the nuclear dump at Parliament House in Adelaide.

A few weeks later, on November 6, the Citizens' Jury rejected the nuclear dump plan. Journalist Daniel Wills wrote: "Brutally, jurors cited a lack of trust even in what they had been asked to do and their concerns that consent was being manufactured. Others skewered the Government's basic competency to get things done, doubting that it could pursue the industry safely and deliver the dump on-budget."

In the immediate aftermath of the Citizens' Jury, the SA Liberal Party and the Nick Xenophon Team announced that they would actively campaign against the dump in the lead-up to the March 2018 state election. The SA Greens were opposed from the start.

Premier Weatherill previously said that he established the Citizens' Jury because he could sense that there is a "massive issue of trust in government". It was expected that when he called a press conference on November 14, the Premier would accept the Jury's verdict and dump the dump. But he announced that he wanted to hold a referendum on the issue, as well as giving affected

Aboriginal communities a right of veto. Nuclear dumpsters went on an aggressive campaign to demonise the Citizens' Jury though they surely knew that the bias in the Jury process was all in the pro-nuclear direction.

For the state government to initiate a referendum, enabling legislation would be required and non-government parties said they would block such legislation. The government didn't push the matter – perhaps because of the near-certainty that a referendum would be defeated. The statewide consultation process led by the government randomly surveyed over 6,000 South Australians and found 53% opposition to the proposal compared to 31% support. Likewise, a November 2016 poll commissioned by the *Sunday Mail* found 35% support for the nuclear dump plan among 1,298 respondents.

Then the Labor government announced on 15 November 2016 that it would not seek to repeal or amend the SA Nuclear Waste Storage Facility (Prohibition) Act 2000, legislation which imposes major constraints on the ability of the government to move forward with the nuclear waste import proposal.

Economic claims exposed

Implausible claims about the potential economic benefits of importing nuclear waste had been discredited by this stage. The claims presented in the Royal Commission's report were scrutinised by experts from the US-based Nuclear Economics Consulting Group (NECG), commissioned by a Joint Select Committee of the SA Parliament.

The NECG report said the waste import project *could* be profitable *under certain assumptions* – but the report then raised serious questions about most of those assumptions. The report noted that the Royal Commission's economic analysis failed to consider important issues which "have significant serious potential to adversely impact the project and its commercial outcomes"; that assumptions about price were "overly optimistic" in which case "project profitability is seriously at risk"; that the 25% cost contingency for delays and blowouts was likely to be a significant underestimate; and that the assumption the project would capture 50% of the available market had "little support or justification".

The farcical and dishonest engineering of a positive economic case to proceed with the nuclear waste plan was ridiculed by ABC journalist Stephen Long on 8 November 2016: "Would you believe me if I told you the report that the commission has solely relied on was co-authored by the

president and vice president of an advocacy group for the development of international nuclear waste facilities?"

The economics report was an inside job, with no second opinion and no peer review – no wonder the Citizens' Jury was unconvinced and unimpressed.

South Australian economist Prof. Richard Blandy, from Adelaide University, said: "The forecast profitability of the proposed nuclear dump rests on highly optimistic assumptions. Such a dump could easily lose money instead of being a bonanza."

The dump is finally dumped

To make its economic case, the Royal Commission assumed that tens of thousands of tonnes of high-level nuclear waste would be imported before work had even begun building a deep underground repository. The state government hosed down concerns about potential economic losses by raising the prospect of customer countries paying for the construction of waste storage and disposal infrastructure in SA.

But late last year, nuclear and energy utilities in Taiwan – seen as one of the most promising potential customer countries – made it clear that they would not pay one cent towards the establishment of storage and disposal infrastructure in SA and they would not consider sending nuclear waste overseas unless and until a repository was built and operational.

By the end of 2016, the nuclear dump plan was very nearly dead, and the Premier's recent statement that it is "not something that will be progressed by the Labor Party in Government" was the final nail in the coffin. The dump has been dumped.

"Today's news has come as a relief and is very much welcomed," said Yankunytjatjara Native Title Aboriginal Corporation Chair and No Dump Alliance spokesperson Karina Lester. "We are glad that Jay has opened his ears and listened to the community of South Australia who have worked hard to be heard on this matter. We know nuclear is not the answer for our lands and people – we have always said NO."

Narungga man and human rights activist Tauto Sansbury said: "We absolutely welcome Jay Weatherill's courageous decision for looking after South Australia. It's a great outcome for all involved."